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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the contingent media relations policy employed by Rockwell International, the prime contractor of the United States space shuttle program, following the 1986 destruction of the Challenger, and evaluates that policy in terms of its utility to Rockwell and its impact on public dissemination of information about the shuttle disaster. The paper analyzes the corporate responses of Rockwell from two perspectives: (1) it evaluates the varied reactions of Rockwell executives to the incident (obtained through personal, off-the-record interviews collected between June 1986 and June 1987) through an established theoretical model of crisis perception; and (2) it considers the impact of the Rockwell policy on the mass media's ability to provide comprehensive, technical information about the incident to the public. The paper advances the thesis that senior management at Rockwell, in consultation with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), deliberately established a public response policy designed primarily to limit discussion of the Challenger accident in the public sphere, resulting in an information vacuum of sorts that severely restricted the mass media, especially newspapers, from providing to the public timely, technical information respecting the shuttle explosion. The paper concludes that the descriptive account illustrates a need for more careful consideration by both public and private sectors of appropriate policy and guidelines respecting the role of public discourse in the operation and maintenance of highly technical systems that harbor potential to bring sudden harm to society. (Forty-one notes are included, and 18 references are appended.) (MS)

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PULLING UP THE DRAWBRIDGE: A CASE STUDY OF ROCKWELL INTERNATIONAL'S PUBLIC RESPONSE POLICY FOLLOWING THE DESTRUCTION OF THE SPACE SHUTTLE CHALLENGER

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Introduction

This paper describes the contingent media relations policy employed by Rockwell International, the prime contractor of the U.S. space shuttle program, following the destruction January 28, 1986, of the Challenger, and evaluates that policy in terms of its utility to Rockwell and its impact on public dissemination of information about the shuttle disaster.

The paper analyzes the corporate response of Rockwell from two perspectives: First, it evaluates the varied reactions of Rockwell executives to the incident through an established theoretical model of crisis perception. Second, it considers the impact of the Rockwell policy on the mass media's ability to provide comprehensive, technical information about the incident to the public.

The study advances the thesis that senior management at Rockwell, in consultation with NASA, deliberately established a public response policy designed primarily to limit discussion of the Challenger accident in the public sphere, resulting in an information vacuum of sorts that severely restricted the mass media, especially newspapers, from providing to the public timely, technical information respecting the shuttle explosion.

Information for the study obtained through personal interviews was collected between June, 1986 and June, 1987. In some cases, former employees of Rockwell agreed to speak with the author only upon condition that information provided would not be attributed to them. Such information proved to be invaluable in providing background material that could be utilized in

preparation for on-the-record interviews with current Rockwell employees. Some information from off-the-record interviews is included in this report to establish fuller context, but it is used sparingly. In keeping with the author's promise, no attribution is included in those instances.

Rockwell's Role in the Space Program

Rockwell International is an industrial corporation with four core businesses: aerospace, electronics, automotive, and general industries. In 1985, the corporation acquired Allen-Bradley, the world leader in industrial automation, for $1.7 billion. Rockwell International had approximately 123,000 employees in 1985, 121 manufacturing plants, and 347 other facilities in thirty countries. Net earnings for fiscal 1985 were $595.3 million on sales of $11.3 billion.[1]

Rockwell has been active in the manned space program since the 1960s, when it was the prime contractor for the Apollo spacecraft that took Americans to the moon. The corporation characterizes itself as the world leader in manned space activities. As of 1985, approximately 75 percent of all manned and unmanned space flights in the United States had been powered by engines produced at Rockwell's Rocketdyne Division.

Rockwell delivered the last of four space shuttles it built for NASA to that agency during April, 1985; however, its

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[1]Rockwell International 1985 Annual Report, p. 1.

involvement in the shuttle program was still strong. It had continuing contract work with NASA for production of structural spare parts for the orbiters, manufacture and modification of shuttle engines, logistics support, plus payload and systems integration. In September, 1985, the corporation won an $800 million contract from NASA to perform mission support operations at the Johnson Space Center in Houston. Rockwell created a new subsidiary--Rockwell Shuttles Operations Company--to do the work.[2]

The Shuttle Program--from Ambition to Rags

1985 had been the most active year for the space shuttle program. In its annual report for 1985, Rockwell International noted that eight successful shuttle launches had been made during the fiscal year, the most ambitious flight schedule since John W. Young and Robert L. Crippen made the first shuttle flight aboard Columbia April 12, 1981. The four orbiters--Columbia, Challenger, Discovery, Atlantis--had made twenty-four consecutive flights without any major malfunctions.

But 1986 saw shuttle operations off to an ominous start. Rep. Bill Nelson of Florida had been a member of the Columbia's flight crew January 6, 1986, when the countdown was interrupted and the flight cancelled at T minus 31 seconds. The launch crew had accidentally drained 18,000 pounds of liquid oxygen from the

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[2]Ibid., p. 8.

shuttle's main fuel tank, causing a drop in main engine temperature below safety margins. Nelson's ride into space had already been postponed from the year before when William Graham, who took over as acting administrator of NASA early in December, 1985, after NASA chief James Beggs took a leave of absence, had gone to Cape Kennedy, seen that the launch crews were severely overworked, and postponed Nelson's flight until January. To add to his consternation, after the January 6 abort, Graham was told that a launch crew member had accidentally broken a small temperature probe that fell into the shuttle's main engine. Had the flight continued, the results could have been catastrophic. The Columbia mission with Nelson finally launched January 12. The next scheduled flight was Challenger Mission 51-L that had been originally planned for January 22, 1986--the first flight of that year--but postponed until January 28 because of problems with logistics and mechanics.

Mission 51-L promised to be an extraordinary flight in an extraordinary year for NASA. The presence of Christa McAuliffe, the 37-year old high school teacher from New Hampshire, in the flight crew gave the mission a special luster. The first private citizen into space, she was a passenger whose presence signified the integrity and reliability of the shuttle system. For NASA public information people, the mission was a grand special event, one that had been preceded by a flood tide of publicity. Originally, the Challenger mission had been penciled in as the first shuttle flight for 1986, a year in which NASA was intent on demonstrating that it could refuel and re-equip its shuttle

fleet quickly enough to handle 15 launches.

The Challenger lifted off its launch pad at 11:38 a.m. Eastern Standard Time, completed its roll program sixteen seconds later and streaked up into the blue Florida sky, just as it had done nine times before. The shuttle continued through its routine flight evolutions until 73 seconds into the mission, when Challenger, as Lance Morrow noted in Time, suddenly and spectacularly annihilated itself in full view of the world:

> A terrible beauty exploded like a primal event of physics--the birth of a universe; the death of a star; a fierce, enigmatic violence out of the blue. The mind recoiled in sheer surprise. Then it filled with horror.[3]

And almost as instantaneous, the public response policy at Rockwell set off on two widely divergent tacks, not unlike the errant solid rocket boosters of the disintegrating Challenger.

Rockwell's Public Response Fragments Along Professional Lines

Knights and Squires--Lines of Authority at Rockwell

As noted before, Rockwell International is a conglomerate with more than 123,000 full-time employees working in four core businesses. It is not necessary to offer a comprehensive picture of its scheme or organization here, but it will facilitate understanding to examine the corporate and divisional lines of authority that were involved in the formulation of its public response

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[3]Lance Morrow, untitled essay, Time, February 10, 1986, p. 23.

policy following the Challenger disaster.

Rockwell's corporate staff is distributed between two headquarters, one in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and the other in El Segundo, California, outside Los Angeles. In 1986, Robert Anderson, a former Chrysler executive, was chairman and chief executive officer of Rockwell. Among others reporting directly to him were Sam Petok, senior vice president for communication, and George W. Jeffs, corporate vice president and president of Rockwell's North American Space Division.

Petok had been with Rockwell for 10 years. His background included extensive work in journalism and public relations. He had spent part of his professional career in the Detroit area. Petok had come to Rockwell largely through a previous professional association with CEO Anderson.

Petok oversaw a communications staff that had personnel and facilities at both the El Segundo and Pittsburgh headquarters, devoted to various aspects of corporate communication, including media relations, community relations, and investor relations. His media relations manager for the West Coast was Earl Blount, a veteran public relations man who had started work for North American Aviation in the 1950s.

George Jeffs' affiliation with Rockwell started in 1947 when he joined what was then North American Aviation as a member of its aerophysics laboratory. He served as assistant program director for the Apollo program from 1966-69 and was Apollo program director from 1969 to 1973. He had served also as space shuttle program

manager before being promoted to president of the aerospace division. In the corporate culture of Rockwell, the adjective that is most commonly affixed to Jeffs is "brilliant." He is credited with developing the concept of real time management responsiveness for space flight, including the in-flight support of the Apollo missions that allowed quick solutions of critical flight problems, such as occurred during the Apollo 13 mission. Jeffs is described by his co-workers as a passionate, intense man, committed to Rockwell and its center-stage role in the U.S. manned space program.

Reporting directly to Jeffs at the El Segundo headquarters was Patricia Mancini, vice president for government relations and communications for North American Space Operations. Mancini's advancement at Rockwell had been closely associated with Jeffs' ascendance up the corporate ladder. The two executives had worked together for many years, and Mancini had developed a thorough understanding of Jeffs' attitude toward the press.

Early Attempts Made to Form a Patchwork Crisis Communication Response

During the morning of January 28, 1986, Richard Barton, manager of public relations for Rockwell's Space Transportation Systems Division in Downey, California, was watching the Challenger liftoff on television.[4] Barton had been on medical leave of

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[4]Richard E. Barton, interview by author, Tape recording, Downey, California, 9 October 1986.

absence from Rockwell since December, 1985. His public relations office at Downey naturally would become the media focal point for information releases from Rockwell respecting the Challenger mission. The space shuttle orbiters were designed and fabricated at the Downey plant. Barton reported to Rocco Petrone, a former NASA manager, who headed the Space Transportation division. Petrone, in turn, reported to George Jeffs in El Segundo.

Barton's first reaction after watching the Challenger explode was to call corporate headquarters in Pittsburgh to discuss with Donald Poland, Petok's director of media relations for the east, how Rockwell would respond to media inquiries. He also called Earl Blount, Petok's western media relations manager. All three men agreed that they should provide information to the media on request; however, they would avoid speculation on possible causes of the accident or about the likely impact the disaster would have on the manned space program. Pittsburgh was going to refer media calls to Barton's staff in Downey. But, within thirty minutes of the shuttle explosion, Barton received a telephone call from his staff in Downey informing him that word had been passed down from Petrone's office that no information should be given to the media. Officially, Rockwell was instituting a news embargo.

Barton advised his staff to obey the no comment order. He also instructed them to refer all media calls to his residence. The calls started coming to Barton's home a few minutes later and continued for several days. Barton estimated that he was taking

upwards of 250 telephone calls a day from reporters around the country who needed basic information about the shuttle configuration and flight procedure.

In El Segundo January 28, George Jeffs was presiding over a program review in Rockwell's board room. A television set had been turned on so that he and his staff could watch the liftoff from the Kennedy Space Center.[5] So Jeffs, like millions of other Americans, witnessed the seemingly routine shuttle "boost" that suddenly turned to catastrophy. His reaction was instinctive. Among the actions he took in the minutes following the accident was to contact Patricia Mancini and instruct her to promulgate an order that no employee in the North American Space Operations division, including public relations personnel, was to respond to questions from news reporters. Interviewed in 1987, Mancini said she was able to establish such a news embargo within hours of the incident. However, other evidence would suggest that it took closer to two weeks for Jeffs and Mancini to orchestrate a corporate-wide embargo.[6]

Meanwhile, as Mancini was trying to enforce a no comment response policy from her office in El Segundo, Earl Blount and other personnel from Sam Petok's corporate communication staff at El Segundo were responding to media calls and providing information within the general guidelines that are a normal part of most crisis communication plans--avoid speculation, do not discuss liability,

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[5]George W. Jeffs, interview with the author, Tape recording, El Segundo, California, 2 June 1987.

[6]Ms. Patricia F. Mancini, personal interview with the author, Tape recording, 2 June 1987.

avoid predicting when things will return to normal, etc. Interviewed several months later, Blount remembered that he and his associates on the corporate side automatically went into a crisis mode of operation:

> Well, I didn't ask anybody (for permission). You know, you're getting phone calls by the ton. I felt certainly that we should respond to the questions that we could answer--how big it is, what's the crew, when was it built. And yet, there were people who couldn't do that. So we spent the first week or two on the shuttle just reacting. The media were very responsible in my view, by and large. I was never asked to speculate on the cause of the accident; we didn't know and could not have anyway.[7]

And as Blount and the other corporate communication people responded to the media rush, Richard Barton, of course, was running his clandestine press briefing operation out of his home. Hence, during the two weeks immediately following the shuttle accident, a sort of patchwork crisis communication program was in effect throughout portions of the Rockwell realm.

According to Blount, this sort of fragmented public communication policy existed for close to two weeks following the Challenger accident. But after two weeks had passed, the word came down from Petok's office that the corporation would no longer release information about the Challenger or the space shuttle program in general nor would it respond to queries by news organizations. The corporate-wide information blackout, according to Blount and Barton, signaled that Jeffs had persisted with his call for an absolute "no comment" policy to the point that Petok

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[7]Earl Blount, interview with the author, Tape recording, 30 September 1986.

had finally deferred to Jeffs' jurisdictional insistence. The information embargo was absolute. Not even nominal information related to payload, configuration, rocket thrust, and general engineering specifications were to be discussed with the media.

Reflecting on the situation in his offices seven months later, Petok treated the episode in a seemingly perfunctory manner, suggesting that the situation called for only a limited public response. The Challenger episode, he said, did not really qualify as a crisis for Rockwell:

> We were only the builder. It was not really a crisis for the corporation, as such, although we recognized the tragedy of it and felt a tremendous sense of loss because many of our people knew the astronauts personally. But our public posture was a low-profile position.[8]

It was, Petok said, a crisis for the country, a crisis for NASA, and a severe blow to the pride of the nation. He acknowledged that Rockwell had been beseiged by the news media for information, and noted that the decision to follow a no comment policy had been made over internal objections.

> They were all over us for insight. They wanted to interview our people, they wanted to speculate on the cause. But we were determined that we would not do anything to disturb the investigation. We would not do anything to speculate or try to fix blame any place. We did not feel that was our function or role, although there was a lot of internal grumbling from our communication people because we are probably notorious for not commenting. But it was our view that we should not make any of our people available, and we didn't.[9]

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[8]Sam Petok, interview with the author, Tape recording, 23 September 1986.

[9]Ibid.

But within a matter of days after the total information embargo had been accomplished, Rockwell found itself under attack by one of its former employees and lifted the embargo temporarily to respond to the charges that had been made. Dr. Howard Frankel, a former medical director at Rockwell's Palmdale, California, plant where the shuttles were finally assembled, had charged February 18, 1986, on a Palm Springs radio broadcast that drug and alcohol abuse by Rockwell employees working on the shuttles had resulted in shoddy work and may have been a contributing factor to the doom of the Challenger.[10] The story was picked up quickly by the wire services. Rockwell responded with the following press release that called Dr. Frankel's allegations reckless:

> Dr. Frankel's allegations are inaccurate and recklessly irresponsible. Rockwell International is a leader in the country in tackling head-on the problem of substance abuse in the workplace.
>
> These allegations impugn the integrity of our Shuttle work and the dedicated people who build the Shuttle. Every piece of hardware produced on our Shuttle contracts was subject to multiple Quality Assurance inspections, and met all rigorous NASA space flight standards.[11]

The corporate response was carried in newspapers around the country. The following headline from the Pittsburgh Press is typical of the defensive posture Rockwell found itself in:

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[10]Audio Video Reporting Services, news clip of radio broadcast over KFWM radio 18 February 1986, received by Rockwell International 18 February 1986.

[11]Rockwell International, untitled, undated internal memorandum.

Rockwell denies alcohol,
drugs hurt shuttle work[12]

Following the Frankel episode, the information embargo was reinstated corporate-wide, and it remained the official policy until mid-summer of 1986, when a memo was circulated to public relations personnel detailing an administrative screening process for release of information about the shuttle program to the media. The screening process mandated that all information would have to be approved through shuttle program manager Petrone's office, as well as Mancini's office in El Segundo and Petok's office in El Segundo. When he was interviewed in October, 1986, Richard Barton said the screening procedure for release of information was still in effect--technically.[13]

Perceptual Differences at Rockwell Lead to Contradictory Response Standards

It is evident that executives at Rockwell divided along professional lines respecting their interpretation of the shuttle loss as crisis and, subsequently, advocated response standards in dealing with the mass media that were diametric. Operations executives George Jeffs and Rocko Petrone, with their professional backgrounds rooted in the engineering profession, advocated a "no comment" policy toward media inquiries. But communication managers, including Sam Petok's corporate communication staff and

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[12]"Rockwell denies alcohol, drugs hurt shuttle work," The Pittsburgh Press, 19 February 1986.

[13]Richard Barton interview, 9 October 1986.

Richard Barton in the Space Transportations Systems Division, argued for cooperative relations. True, Patricia Mancini was by title a member of the communication staff, but she normally deferred to the admonitions of Jeffs, according to former Rockwell employees.

Utilizing a Crisis Perception Model

The situation as it existed at Rockwell during the Challenger episode becomes more comprehensible when superimposed over a model of crisis perception developed from theoretical and empirical research by Billings, Milburn and Schaalman. Their model was partially tested using data from a study of reactions by decision makers at 177 industrial and educational organizations respecting cutbacks in natural gas allocations.[14] Central to their model is the proposition that crisis is defined by a set of variables as perceived by the decision maker:

> These perceptions may differ from the objective situation or from the perceptions of others. Two actors may be in precisely the same situation, yet one may feel uncertainty, time pressure, etc., and define the situation as a crisis, while the other may see it as a routine decision-making situation. Crisis resides in the person as well as in the situation.[15]

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[14]Robert S. Billings, Thomas W. Milburn, and Mary Lou Schaalman, "A Model of Crisis Perception: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis," Administrative Science Quarterly, June 1980, Vol. 25, p. 300.

[15]Ibid., p. 306.

In the model developed by Billings et al., the first prerequisite to establishing a situation as a crisis is the individual's perception of a "triggering event" in the environment.[16] Clearly, in the Challenger episode this is a moot point--the shuttle self-destructed in full view of the world, taking seven lives with it. However, the triggering event must be evaluated against some standard of measure of how things should be if a problem is to be sensed. It is this qualification, in large part, that contributed to the differences in perception among Rockwell decision makers. The shuttle accident was a crisis for NASA--everyone concurred with that evaluation. But was it a crisis for Rockwell, especially the North American Space Division?

As already noted, Sam Petok, head of corporate communication for Rockwell, in a perfunctory if not naive way, suggested that the shuttle accident was not a crisis for Rockwell because they were "only the builder." George Jeffs, president of the North American Space Division, who prevailed in setting the corporation's public response policy, saw Challenger as tragic but an event that was essentially a problem for his people to examine and fix. No need existed, according to him, to establish a special management team to cope with the situation because in the space business they are always prepared to respond to such eventualities. Jeffs offered the following assessment of the situation as it developed January 28, 1986:

> The immediate corporate concern was what could have gone wrong and let's find it and fix it and then after that I think the concern for any kind of corporate image was quite secondary to this corporation. I think there was more focus by the press than there was by the leadership. . . . In the ongoing real time process there are teams of people working together that immediately arise to the solution of any problem as it arises during the flight. So this kind of problem is just another flight problem, although a big one.[17]

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[16]Ibid., p. 302.

[17]George Jeffs interview 2 June 1987.

But as a counterpoint to the perceptions of Jeffs and Petok, many of the personnel at Rockwell with responsibility for maintaining external communication programs, including Earl Blount and Richard Barton, perceived Challenger as an event that signaled a crisis for NASA, Rockwell, and other contractors who were part of the shuttle program. Barton thought the Apollo launch pad fire that killed three astronauts in 1967 and the Challenger accident were the two biggest crises the North American Space Division had faced.[18] Blount also compared the two episodes similarly and recounted that in the months following the Apollo tragedy, Rockwell had given him a million dollars to create a special public relations program to educate and inform the press and public about the challenges and technical aspects of the Apollo program.[19]

Returning to the model of crisis perception of Billings, et al., the authors postulate that after a discrepancy between an existing state and a standard state is perceived by an individual, the seriousness of the problem--the degree of perceived crisis--becomes a function of three factors: perceived value of possible loss, probability of loss, and time pressure.[20]

The value of possible loss is determined primarily by the size of the discrepancy between the standard and the existing state; however, the significance of the problem in terms of the extent of harm caused by the problem not being solved also affects such a perception. In the Challenger episode, the value of the

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[18]Richard Barton, interview, 9 October 1986.

[19]Earl Blount interview, 30 September 1986.

[20]Billings, et al., "Model of Crisis Perception," p. 303-304.

loss depended greatly on how fast and effectively NASA and its contractors could discover what went wrong and how it could be fixed. Possibly, the seriousness of the situation for Rockwell operations executives seemed to diminish in the days following the accident, when data review and investigation seemed to point more conclusively to the malfunction of the solid rocket booster manufactured by Morton Thiokol as the technical cause of the explosion.

Indeed, when interviewed in June 1987, Jeffs volunteered that a contingency communication plan established for such an eventuality was not operationalized by the corporation after it became apparent that the shuttle's main engines manufactured by Rockwell's Rocketdyne Division performed normally during the ill-fated flight. Rockwell had been removed effectively from the list of shuttle contractors whose hardware might have been the cause of the accident. "In fact, we had data past the incident indicating that the engines still were operating, so we knew that it wasn't the engines, but we were still very careful (about public statements)."[21] Jeffs implied that had Rockwell equipment been at fault, the situation would have been perceived as more serious for the corporation:

> Now, we had some contingency backup on the communication side in case, of course, it was Rockwell hardware. How in hell do we react to that? What do we say? And why? I can't speak for other companies because I don't know about other companies, but this company is a pretty straight forward company. We don't

[21]George Jeffs interview, 2 June 1987.

> try and Mickey Mouse anything. We tell it like it is. We try and tell the truth. So there wasn't any kind of a run-around back-up plan that so-calls protects your fanny or anything like that. It was a matter of let's go find the facts and we'll take them as they are and we'll fix the problems.[22]

Time Pressure and Professional Perception

Probability of loss, the second factor in perceiving the seriousness of an episode as explained through the Billings-Milburn-Schaalman model is moot here because the event had indeed occurred.

However, the third factor, time pressure, does relate directly to how Rockwell decision-makers perceived Challenger. Billings, et al, state that the more distant a future negative consequence seems for an individual, the less negative it will seem. In the extreme, the most dysfunctional sort of time pressure results when an adequate solution has not been found and time is not seen as sufficient for further search and deliberation.[23] Undoubtedly, such a state of affairs existed within NASA after the Challenger--the entire manned space program came to a halt until the problem could be resolved. And Rockwell International, as the prime contractor, was very much within the focus of public attention, as it would be until the shuttle program had been restored to operational status.

This situation, one could postulate, affected the perceptions of the two affected professional camps within Rockwell, the engineers and the communicators. Blount and Barton, decision-makers in the communication camp, thought it was imperative that the corporation

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[22]Ibid.

[23]Billings, et al, "Model of Crisis Perception," p. 306.

respond to media queries and maintain a continuing dialog with the media to keep reporters and writers abreast of developments. Both men believed the media and the general public perceived the Challenger incident as a crisis for America's manned space program, and thought that it was vital to Rockwell's best interest that the media be given the information they needed, within the prescribed guidelines for crisis communication.

However, the engineers, headed by Jeffs, saw the media's insistence for information as dysfunctional to problem resolution. In Jeffs' view, the news reporter's role and the investigating engineer's role are incompatible, as espoused by him in the following statement:

> That's the one thing the public doesn't really understand very well and the press understands even less; that in problem resolution that the solution ninety-nine times out of a hundred is not the obvious solution. . . .They've (the press) got to have a solution right now, which I think is damaging to the process.[24]

Tested Crisis Plan Ignored

According to Burson-Marsteller counselors, a crisis preparedness plan is the hallmark of a company that knows how to

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[24]George Jeffs interview, 2 June 1987.

act intelligently during a crisis. Harold Burson notes:

> Based on hard-earned experience, we are convinced that companies can prepare themselves to manage a crisis effectively, and, occasionally, avert a crisis by implementing a well-coordinated preparedness plan.[25]

Jim Lindheim, senior vice president and director of public affairs for Burson-Marsteller, stressing the importance of planning, states that the first recommendation his people make to a client after arriving at the scene of a crisis is to create a crisis management team, if that has not been done.[26]

From the description of communication related activities that occurred at Rockwell in the days following the Challenger accident one might suspect that Rockwell had no crisis communication plan to rely on should a so called "worst case scenario" occur. However, such was not the case. Indeed, a comprehensive, well-tested crisis communication plan existed at Rockwell, but was not put into motion January 28, 1986,or any time thereafter.

When Rockwell was awarded the contract as prime contractor for the shuttle in 1972, its public relations personnel immediately developed a crisis response plan that could be used to coordinate communication during shuttle mission emergencies. Meetings were held with personnel from NASA, Rockwell, Martin-Marietta, Morton-Thiokol, Good Year, IBM, and other associate contractors. Formal communication procedures were agreed upon and written down. NASA and Rockwell would be the two focal points for information

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[25]Harold Burson, "Damage Control in a Crisis," Management Review Monthly, December 1985, p. 44.

[26]James Wilson, "Managing Communication in Crisis: An Expert's View," IABC Communication World, December 1985, p. 14.

collection and subsequent distribution to the press. Generally, the scheme called for Rockwell's subcontractors, such as Good Year and IBM, to feed information to Rockwell for review and subsequent release. The associate contractors, Morton-Thiokol and Martin-Marietta, would coordinate their information through NASA. And, of course, NASA and Rockwell would mutually coordinate public dissemination of information.[27]

The plan called for Rockwell to establish a communication command post at its Downey facility, where Richard Barton would serve as coordinator. Earl Blount of the corporate office would be stationed at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida. Another Rockwell employee would be stationed at the Johnson Space Center in Houston during a launch. This plan was instituted even before the approach and landing exercises were performed by flight crews at Edwards Air Force Base in the prototype shuttle Enterprise. The system was used during most of the subsequent shuttle missions, and, according to Barton, its utility was tested on several occasions when relatively minor problems developed during shuttle flights. Additionally, in the early days of the shuttle program, Barton's staff had created a press book of several hundred pages that provided detailed drawings of all shuttle systems and explained their operation. Hundreds of copies of the book had been distributed to the press so that they would have a ready reference to consult when mission problems were encountered.

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[27]Richard Barton interview, 9 October 1986.

However, when the Challenger blasted off on mission 51-L, the crisis communication network had been retired by Rockwell. None of its communication people were at Cape Canaveral or Houston, and only two people were working in the public relations office at Downey the morning of January 28. But those conditions notwithstanding, the corporation still had the heart of any crisis communication plan--its trained, tested media relations personnel--available to jump into the breech and organize a response. But, of course, Rockwell operations executives chose not to do that.

Following NASA's Lead: Doing What Comes Naturally

The Challenger exploded at precisely 11:39 Eastern Standard Time. NASA, quite literally, went into an instant state of organizational shock. Five hours passed before the space agency held a news conference--and NASA was beset by a barrage of criticism from the press for its reticence. Writing in Public Relations Journal, Sam Marshall noted that NASA's violation of the first principle of crisis communication quickly fanned the flames of criticism:

> By all accounts, from insiders and outsiders alike, the most crucial factor in setting the credibility crisis awhirl seems to have been NASA's initial failure to communicate. On the day of the accident, the official NASA news conference, pushed back several times, finally came off nearly five hours after the fact. The list of mitigating, circumstantial reasons seemingly goes on forever.[28]

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[28]Sam Marshall, "NASA After Challenger: The Public Affairs Perspective," Public Relations Journal, August 1986, p. 18.

Chief among the organizational factors that put NASA into organizational paralysis was the discontinuity in leadership that was apparent in the administrator's office and the public affairs office. The top NASA position was being filled temporarily by William Graham, as already noted, and the NASA public affairs office was headed by Shirley Green, a former deputy press secretary for Vice President George Bush. Neither Graham nor Green had previous professional experience related to the space program.

Rockwell operations managers, as noted before, were quick to follow suit in turning their backs to the press. When asked if she had been in contact with NASA directly following the shuttle explosion, Patricia Mancini responded:

> Absolutely, absolutely. In fact, I think we informed them in about an hour or so. ... I had gone to NASA immediately and told them what our position was going to be, that we were going to refer all inquiries to them, and they agreed to that.[29]

The behavior of operations managers at Rockwell and NASA in those days following the shuttle accident resulted, it would seem, from what Harold Burson says is a natural tendency in crisis situations:

> At the onset of a crisis, one thing is certain: No one is sure how to solve it. Thus the first response of management is often not to communicate -- to anyone.[30]

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[29]Patricia Mancini interview, 2 June 1987.

[30]Harold Burson, "Damage Control," p. 43.

Burson says that, typically, managers become overly concerned with finding all the facts, considering possible legal ramifications, protecting proprietary interests, and selecting the right spokesperson. As a result, they lose an excellent opportunity to gain control of the information distribution system:

> While the company is busy unearthing facts, getting legal advice, and finding the appropriate person to speak on its behalf, people outside the company are forming opinions about the company and proposing actions to address the crisis. In the absence of the company's perspective, it is likely that the opinions formed and actions proposed will not be in the company's best interest.[31]

George Jeffs' attitude and behavior would certainly seem to reinforce Burson's tenet, in terms of the dysfunctional circumstances that are likely to prevail when managers refuse to communicate. Jeffs readily admits he has no regard for the press. "I've never had a high regard for the press in the first place," he noted, "but I think they've gotten worse in the second place."[32]

Jeffs' reason for not cooperating with the press during the days following the accident was simple: The press injects an irrelevant dimension to the problem solution phase of the crisis and the press is incapable of understanding the process. Therefore, he reasoned, the press is not likely to report responsibly about it. He offered the following assessment:

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[31]Harold Burson, "Damage Control," p. 43.

[32]George Jeffs interview, 2 June 1987.

> I don't think the press inquiries at times like that are routine; I think they're always probing for more. ... It's an investigative environment and they're trying to do everything they can to get our people to do things or to say things that in some way they can make a story out of. And we have to have a reasonably disciplined organization or we just can't get the job done.[33]

Yet, in almost the next breath, Jeffs could complain that engineers outside the shuttle program spoke to the press about possible causes of the accident and the future of the manned space program:

> It was very disconcerting to me in the process to hear all the pseudo-experts, some of whom came from Cal Tech; there's the JPL (Jet Propulsion Laboratory) guys over there talking about they knew what the cause of the incident was, you know--pseudo-engineers, I call them.[34]

But what Jeffs failed to understand is that the news media listened to the JPL guys because the managers at Rockwell who were directly involved in the shuttle program refused to talk with them. In terms of general public relations theory, the news media are prime examples of an active public, and if the source closest to the information will not talk to them they will then go to the source that is a step removed from the factual situation to get the information. That is precisely what happened in the Challenger episode. Rockwell failed to communicate with the press about an event that turned out to be the No. 1 news story of 1986 in the United States, and had to suffer the consequences.[35]

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[33]Ibid.

[34]Ibid.

[35]"The Top 10 News Stories of 1986," World Press Review, February 1987, pp. 8, 10.

Rockwell's Communication Policy Contributes to Information Vacuum

Obviously, the public need for accurate information about the Challenger tragedy was not well served by Rockwell's public response policy. Donald E. Fink, editor of Aviation Week & Space Technology, the leading trade journal in the industry, thought the managers of NASA and its contractors were reluctant to provide any information about the incident because "they were all wondering where the fickle finger of fate would fall." NASA, he said, had put out the word to its contractors not to discuss the episode with the mass media until the Rogers Commission had filed its report. "They really pulled up the drawbridge," he said.[36]

As a result, according to Fink, a substantial information vacuum developed that severely handicapped most press organizations in their ability to report meaningfully about the accident and the future of the shuttle program. Fink said his staff was not at a disadvantage because reporters had developed strong inside sources in both the public and private sectors. However, he said, the general circulation newspapers and other nonspecialized media found it tough because they did not have the inside sources. Consequently, for several weeks after the incident, the editorial office of Aviation Week became something of a clearinghouse for media information.

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[36]Donald Fink, interview with the author, 13 November 1986.

Similarly, Alex Jones of the New York Times had reported two weeks after the incident that news executives across the country felt frustrated in their attempts to provide valid, officially confirmed information about the shuttle accident. Blaming the no-comment policy of NASA and associated agencies for forcing reporters to rely on unconfirmed information that frequently came from unnamed sources, editors said they were unable to fulfill an urgent need for reliable information that could be disseminated to a highly concerned public.[37]

> They said they believed the public was entitled to learn as much as possible now, before its sense of urgency for correcting what went wrong could fade, rather than after a long investigation.
>
> But they also stressed that despite the need for immediacy, accuracy remained paramount in reporting on the accident.[38]

Fred Barbash, deputy national editor of The Washington Post, was quoted as characterizing the shuttle story as the most difficult with which he had ever dealt. News staffs who felt pressured to provide timely stories against the efforts of competing media were vexed by the thought that they might print erroneous information that would embarass them professionally.[39]

Six weeks after the shuttle accident, Meg Greenfield of Newsweek rebuked NASA and the technical camp for its reticence in not discussing the shuttle episode. Acknowledging the technocrats' concern about the public's technical ignorance, she countered that although the public might not appreciate the scientific aspects of problem resolution, it was equipped to render judgment about the rational management of technology:

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[37]Alex J. Jones, "Journalists Say NASA's Reticence Forced Them to Gather Data Elsewhere," New York Times, 9 February 1986, p. 30.

[38]Ibid.

[39]Ibid.

> ...I think we are all equipped to make judgments in these matters and that the nonscientists among us shouldn't be so self-effacing. The manned space vehicles were made to work, not to explode, and their explosion isn't a random thing, something that is simply bound by odds to occur eventually....You don't have to spout off on laws of thermodynamics for that (recognizing management error) and this is the first thing to remember: a reasonable assessment of what went wrong is within the grasp of each of us.[40]

What emerges, then, is an unfortunate scenario where NASA and Rockwell willfully restricted the flow of information to the public concerning problems with an unclassified government program -- the space shuttle -- that became the top news story of 1986. And, not ironically, what George Jeffs at Rockwell saw as a news media proclivity -- the investigative approach -- became more pronounced by his refusal to cooperate with the press in the days and weeks following the loss of the Challenger. His reactionary posture, as demonstrated here, seemingly stemmed from perceptual differences about the seriousness of the Challenger episode and his innate desire to restrict technical discussion about the shuttle to his own professional sphere.

This account has been descriptive, of course, and it does not purport to advance any theoretical construct; however, it illustrates a need for more careful consideration by both public and private sectors of appropriate policy and guidelines respecting the role of public discourse in the operation and maintenance of highly technical systems that harbor potential to bring sudden harm

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[40]Meg Greenfield, "We Must Get Straight Answers," Newsweek, 10 March 1986, p. 84.

to society. The Challenger episode was terrible in terms of human life, but it could have been worse. And only months after Challenger, the world had another word to symbolize the dark side of technology -- Chernobyl. In Normal Accidents, Charles Perrow notes that as technology expands it creates systems that increase the risk for everyone -- operators, passengers, bystanders, and future generations. The good news, says Perrow, is that if we can understand the nature of risky enterprises we may be able to limit or even eliminate associated dangers.[41] Public communication is a crucial element in achieving such understanding, and more research is required to determine how it can be cooperatively promoted.

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[41]Charles Perrow, Normal Accidents (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1984), p. 3.

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